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The North American Political Outlook for the Future

*Ken Freed**

The agenda, read in its narrowest form, says that we are supposed to talk about the North American political outlook for the future. I'm going to keep it in a political context as much as I can and start with some political news. Ms. Lewington's paper, the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, released a poll in two sections on Tuesday and Wednesday (April 7th and 8th, 1987). The poll had to be both distressing to Brian Mulroney and his government, and it was confusing to some of us who try to figure out what is going on in the Canadian political scene.

The first day of the poll that came out wasn't really a surprise. It showed the Liberals with about 40% of the popular opinion, the New Democratic Party at 34% and the Tories at 23%. These are roughly the same figures the Gallup poll and several others have released in the last couple of months. What was shocking to me, and what increases my doubt about my understanding of what was going on, was the second day's poll.

Ed Broadbent was far and away the people's choice as the most competent of the three party leaders. He was trailed by John Turner and then—and this is what is puzzling, although maybe not to the Canadians here, but it was puzzling to me—Brian Mulroney was considered the best leader by only 17%. To me this is beyond comprehension. Two and a half years ago, Brian Mulroney led the Tories to the greatest electoral success in Canadian history. He was favored by all polls at that time, or even shortly after, by 70% of the people as the best of the three leaders. One poll even had him at 76% approval.

I doubt that any modern national leader has fallen so far so fast, particularly with a government that has been accompanied by what most of us would consider to be relatively good economic figures. Some people would say that it's not his doing—that he gets the blame if it is bad news—but not the credit if the news is good.

The reasons for this precipitous plunge vary apparently depending upon whom you talk to about it. Some say that Mulroney is a liar. The *Toronto Sun* calls him "Lying Brian." Other comments include: "He abuses patronage." "He's two-faced." "There's no agenda." "His cabinet in the Prime Minister's office are incompetent, if not dishonest." "He has run a scandal-a-week government." There are people that say that he's unsuited because his clothes are always pressed and other people say

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he has got too good a vocabulary. It goes on and on. I make no judgments here. Of course, Mulroney himself has different explanations.

I had a personal experience with this recently. To the distress of the entire Ottawa press corp, Brian Mulroney met for two hours with five American reporters. We managed to get in a couple minutes of discussion of his political fate amongst his ramblings about his wonderful relations with Ronald Reagan. In many ways it was a curious discussion. We talked to him about a lot of things, but one of the things we liked to talk to him about is what is wrong. Whose fault is it? Are you at fault? Any weaknesses here of your own? What did he think he might have done differently to have saved him from this low state? He talked about the general responsibility of any leader. In his exact words, he said "I have the general responsibility that if things go badly, they are largely the responsibility of the Prime Minister." He had to have a little bit of an out.

He said, of course with 20/20 hindsight anybody can see that he might have done things differently. He also talked about inevitable swings in any parliamentary democratic system. He pointed to Mrs. Thatcher, to Prime Minister Gandhi of India, Prime Minister Nakasone of Japan. All of these folks were suffering the same problems.

He said, essentially, it was somebody else's fault. He looked to the Canadian media. He told us, and he said he's advised all of his friends to do the same thing, that he's stopped reading Canadian newspapers and he no longer listens or looks at news broadcasts. This is not the most important problem, but there was a fault and that's the Canadian people themselves. They have such high expectations, he told us, that nobody, including himself, could meet their hopes; so it was their fault.

Mostly he blamed his Cabinet. I found this to be kind of a peculiar approach. He said if he could do it over again, "I would do things differently and I would do it with different people." He said that "the long periods, as a minority party, had left the Tories with a vacuum that I was forced to fill with people, some of whom had no experience in almost anything. Many had never left their villages in Quebec, a lot of them could barely speak English" and "many had never even been Tories until the 1984 election."

If you think that maybe I'm being incomplete here or taking some of this out of context or that I have a particular bias one way or the other, I would have to say that what I'm saying is an accounting of what I think is the Tories' strategy of the hour. A week before the American reporters met with Mulroney, Don Mazenkowski, the current Deputy Prime Minister, said in a public forum that the reason for the Tories' unpopularity was not Brian Mulroney. It was the poor performance of his Cabinet ministers. It is their fault, not Brian's.

Beyond the Prime Minister's view of placement of blame, what was clear from our conversation was that he intends to fight back with the

help of the United States in one way or another and particularly through the Free Trade negotiations. "We are going to have an agreement," he said, "that is good for both countries and that is going to be part of my record. I'll run on it and I'll be re-elected."

He did say that an agreement would not necessarily be easy. In fact, he acknowledged that most of the recently proclaimed progress has come largely on noncontroversial issues, technical issues, things that could be handled. Other Canadian officials have told me, and Mulroney did not disagree with this, that the tough stuff is not going to come up until, probably, in the summer (of 1987). He did say that there is not going to be an agreement unless Canada is exempted from U.S. countervail legislation and the like. Mulroney said, "Trade remedy laws cannot apply to Canada, period."

The question is, at least in terms of our topic, whether Mulroney's strategy can work and the strategy, of course, is not necessarily to get a good trade agreement. The strategy is to get re-elected. This is not unique to Brian Mulroney. The most dangerous creature in the world is a functionary defending his function, unless it is a politician trying to get re-elected. The answer to whether this can work is maybe. According to the polls and in the abstract, a majority of Canadians favor free trade, but the margins of support have been shrinking. What Mulroney may be counting on, more than theoretical public popularity, is that the opposition is so inherently weak; and when push comes to shove, the voters will have no choice but to go back to the Tories. The Canadian political situation is quite different from the American one and all of the intriguing intrigues to which Ms. Lewington referred in her speech tonight really have no moment in Canada.

Mulroney decides and, if Mulroney has a political will, that is done. The Tories have crashed to the bottom of the political barrel. The Liberals have been slipping. Not only have they suffered from a split in the ranks over free trade—as represented by letters that are circulated among the caucus by one side and the other—the rumor is that a particularly strong critic of free trade may be heading for the New Democratic Party (NDP).

Turner seems also to have failed to hold the momentum that was building when he was reclaimed as a leader at the party convention in December. He seems unsure of himself and unable to resolve, either in his own mind or in the party, what to do about free trade. He can't seem to create or unify a position on defense matters; and, perhaps worst of all, he has not been able to reduce the enormous debt from the 1984 election, let alone raise any new money.

Brian Mulroney has dismissed the Liberals, and I think with some justification in this case. That leaves the New Democrats, who have become the hot issue. Everywhere you go in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, and Vancouver, the topic of discussion is the New Democrats. They have had a tremendous leap in popularity. They rank now as a strong

and growing second across the nation as a political party. They really are challenging the Liberal Party, which itself is stagnating and very far ahead of the Tories.

The reasons for this are about as varied as the reasons given for the fall of Mulroney's popularity. Perhaps the more important question is whether the NDP's popularity can last. If it does, I'm not sure what it means. You may be familiar with the parking concept: the voters are just content with the two big parties. In nonelection times, they park the vote with the NDP, but will probably return to either the Conservatives or the Liberals when voting time comes. That is still a popular theory among most of my Canadian colleagues. But as one NDP strategist told me, it may be parking, but we couldn't even get them to drive by the garage before. Can it last? I don't know, but to tell you the truth, I doubt it.

In my view, all of this business with the NDP popularity and the Liberals' ambivalence, at best, strengthens the likelihood of some type of an agreement, because Mulroney has virtually nothing else going for him. Good economic figures haven't been good enough to save him. A better federal/provincial relationship arguably hasn't helped. Politically motivated government contracts and appointments haven't kept him out of the basement. Basically what is left, and this is an impression that he made no effort to hide from us, is free trade. What this means in political terms is that the details of the Free Trade Agreement are largely irrelevant.

It is not important that the negotiators come up with an agreement that is good for both sides. What is important is that this agreement not be a total and obvious sellout from the Canadian point of view. The agreement should allow Mulroney, by his own definitions, to say this is going to help the country and it may be over a 10- or 15-year period. And it needs to be clear that he thinks he has no choice.

Mulroney's only hope for staying in power is a Free Trade Agreement. Everything else is lost for him. Now, as I say, he needs American help here. This cannot be an agreement where the Americans stand up and dance on his grave. If the Americans can keep their mouths shut and allow him to take some credit for something, regardless of whatever the exact terms are, he's a winner in his view. Will it work? I guess. Will the next election, as Mulroney puts it, see the Tories up and the Liberals down and the NDP out? It seems only fair to say that I don't know.